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ABSTRACT

There are an estimated 30 million people in the United States with native languages other than English. Within this group are a number of limited-English-proficient individuals. Whether seeking a first American job or better employment, this group encounters a job market that is changing drastically in the number of jobs it can offer to individuals with limited English skills. As a result, growing numbers of these individuals are seeking courses in Vocational English-as-a-Second-Language (VESL) that combine language education with job specific skills. VESL refers to the language needed to interact with English speaking customers or employees, to fill out job applications, or to use manual or catalogues, and its goal is to teach the language required for successful participation in training programs and for job performance. Several different program models have evolved to meet the different skills, education levels, and vocational goals of students. These models include: (1) the ESL approach; (2) the vocational approach; (3) the work experience approach; and (4) the workplace approach. Another model that should be mentioned is the bilingual vocational training model. The following should be considered when designing a VESL program: finances; administration and staff development; curriculum development; needs assessment; support services; and cross-cultural training. (VWL)

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ERIC Digest

Vocational English-as-a-Second-Language Programs

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There are an estimated 30 million people in the United States with native languages other than English. This group includes refugees, migrants, immigrants, permanent residents, and citizens. Within this group are a number of limited-English-proficient (LEP) teenagers and adults that represent many different native cultures, economic and social backgrounds, and levels of education and literacy. These individuals, whether seeking a first American job or looking for better employment, encounter a job market that is changing drastically in the kinds of jobs it can offer to individuals with insufficient English skills. For example, agriculture once hired large numbers of LEP workers, but now employs only one-fourth as many people as it did twenty years ago (Friedenburg, 1987).

The new job market, offering employment, for example, in hotels, hospitals, construction, or manufacturing, welcomes workers with specific occupational skills, and, more importantly, the ability to interact in specialized forms of English. As a result, a growing number of limited English proficient individuals are seeking courses in Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL) that combine language education with instruction in job-specific skills. For these individuals, studying a second language is a tool for advancement; it is not for enjoyment, it's a payoff (Crandall, 1985).

VESL refers to the English needed to interact with English-speaking customers or employees, to fill out job applications, and to use manuals or catalogues. The goal of VESL is to teach the language required for successful participation in training programs and for job performance. Occupational language demands are emphasized, such as training clerical workers to order supplies or to take phone messages, and occupational contexts are used to teach the English needed for employment or for successful participation in vocational classes.

It is necessary that participants receive instruction on the appropriate strategies or styles for interacting with employers, co-workers, and customers. VESL classes should teach students how to initiate conversation, and how and when to interrupt others, respond to others, and end a conversation. Teaching students to ask for clarification is essential and should be emphasized early on in a VESL course. A VESL class must enable the learner to acquire strategies to get more information, to clarify misunderstood information, or to be able to ask for repetition without losing face (From the Classroom to the Workplace: Teaching ESL to Adults, 1983). It is often the case that workers are not able to perform the tasks expected of them because they have not correctly understood names, terms, numbers, or directions.

VESL programs can be located in vocational-technical schools, vocational classrooms, or at a worksite. The aim of these programs is to help LEP individuals find and keep skilled, semi-skilled, paraprofessional, or technical employment.

VESL Program Models

Several different program models have evolved in VESL to meet the different skills, educational levels, English proficiency levels, and vocational goals of students. The length of time spent in English classes, the degree of integration of language and vocational training, and the relationship between the ESL instructor and the vocational instructor all vary, depending on the type of program (From the Classroom to the Workplace: Teaching ESL to Adults, 1983). Kremer (Kremer, 1984) considers these four approaches:

The ESL Approach highlights language training within an employment and vocational context. Classes include: (1) general ESL classes with employment-related concepts that emphasize language competencies in job skills such as those listed in *CASAS Life Skills Competencies List;* (2) general VESL classes that teach workplace communicative skills, such as responding to complaints and requests and seeking clarification, and (3) occupation-specific classes that instruct students in the language competencies needed for a particular field.

The Vocational Approach includes programs that take place in a vocational setting. These programs provide training in specific occupations and in language skills related to the particular occupation. Specialized ESL and cross-cultural training are also provided to students entering vocations such as autobody repair, air conditioning/heating, and healthcare.

The Work Experience Approach combines workplace experience--in public or private sectors--with classwork in VESL and sometimes with vocational skills training. Work experience programs demand extensive time commitments for the two components, but provide support during the transition from training to employment. Students gain local job experience and a reference in order to break the cycle of no experience/no job. Prospective employers can benefit by knowing trainees' work abilities, and by learning about the cultural backgrounds of their future employees before hiring them.

The Workplace Approach focuses on programs that take place at a particular job site, stressing language skills related to specific job areas. Emphasis is placed on job functions, occupational knowledge, career development, and organizational culture. The classes may be offered by companies, community colleges, adult education programs, and trade unions.

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Bilingual Vocational Training Programs

Another important VESL training model that should be mentioned is the Bilingual Vocational Training (BVT) model. BVT programs are appropriate especially in communities with a population of LEP workers who share a common native language. The native language is used in training with ESL or VESL included. The intent of BVT programs is to speed the access to full employment of those LEP individuals who are unemployed or not fully employed. The federal government offers financial support to BVT programs with funds from the following agencies: The Department of Labor under the Job Training Partnership Act; the Department of Education's programs for bilingual, migrant, and vocational education; and the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Several programs are supported by private businesses.

Considerations for Designing a Successful Program

Several considerations are important to the development and implementation of a successful VESL program, including finances; administration, staff, and staff development; curriculum development; needs assessment; post program support services; and cross-cultural training.

Finances. Where will the funding come from? The Job Training Partnership Act, the Refugee Act, or other general local school district allocations are commonly used resources for setting up programs throughout the country. Worksite programs are funded by individual businesses for training their own limited-English-proficient employees. A consortium of workplaces, such as a group of hospitals training healthcare workers, may also pay for their own training programs for employees.

Administration and Staff Development. VESL program administrators ensure the cooperation of groups that may have never worked together before, such as businesses, counselors, and ESL instructors. The orientation of a VESL program staff should include: training ESL/VESL teachers to work with vocational education and employment issues; training vocational instructors to work with LEP students; and preparing counselors and teachers to help students with job-related matters, including job placement.

Curriculum Development. For a general VESL program, the staff identifies materials and recommends how these materials can be adapted to meet the language needs of LEP adults. This adaptation may involve simplification of the language or adding or deleting topics (Clevesy & Kremer, 1988). For specific workplace programs, a whole new curriculum may need to be written. The developers of a curriculum analyze work tasks and communicative goals in order to break them into discrete units for which language and culture can be taught.

Needs Assessment. An important first step of any VESL program is to assess the specific educational and vocational needs of students. The language and educational abilities, cultural backgrounds, and vocational goals of students should be determined prior to their participation in a program. This kind of assessment will help establish reasonable training goals.

The needs of the target population service providers, community agencies, employers, and the local job market should also be evaluated before establishing a VESL program to determine what present and future employment opportunities exist and what kind of training should be offered. Any needs assessment will be an ongoing process as student, community, and job market needs are continually changing (Kremer, 1984).

Support Services. A successful VESL program should provide job counseling, job placement, vocational training and cross-cultural training.

Cross-Cultural Training. LEP workers with poor language skills may resort to inappropriate language or gestures on the job in an effort to make themselves understood. Even workers possessing better language skills may relate to a supervisor in a manner appropriate in their native culture, but considered impolite or too deferential in an American workplace. An employer's awareness of the cultural differences in such a case may help change a potentially bad experience into a learning experience for the worker. The supervisor can instruct the worker on what kind of behavior is appropriate. Proxemics, greeting behavior, and non-verbal communication strategies should also be addressed.

A Key to Success: Cooperation

Content-based ESL curricula in math, science, and social studies are usually developed through cooperation between ESL staff and content area specialists. In VESL programs, this effort includes more levels of cooperation. Businesses and educators must work together at every phase, from the first needs assessment to the ultimate goal of full employment for the LEP trainee. VESL staff members must work to understand each others' responsibilities: Vocational teachers gain an understanding of the challenges faced by nonnative students and their teachers, and ESL teachers gain an appreciation of the tasks involved in learning a specific vocation. Together, vocational and ESL teachers can write a curriculum that consists of appropriate training goals, including job skills and job language. Finally, counselors and teachers can assist businesses by placing LEP trainees in suitable jobs and helping with their adjustment to the new worksite.

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